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ABSTRACT

This study addresses English learner students' (ELs') reading achievement in San Diego public schools in the years after the passage of the "English only" initiative (Proposition 227). To comply with Proposition 227's requirements, all of California's public school districts administered a newly adopted English-language norm referenced test, Stanford Achievement Test, Level 9 (SAT 9) to large numbers of ELs. The statistical evidence indicated that secondary ELs' scores showed little or no improvement across the 2 years after the school system implemented policies to comply with Proposition 227. Secondary ELs SAT 9 Reading mean scaled scores for both years were only 60 or fewer points below the value corresponding to the 50th national percentile rank. Non-EL students at high socioeconomic schools (SES) answered 5-10 more items correctly than counterparts at low SES while ELs at the high secondary SES performed almost identically to counterparts at the low ones. Findings suggest that compliance with the "English Only" initiative requirements has not benefited secondary ELs' SAT 9 performance. (PM)

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Early indications of English learners' reading achievement in San Diego public schools after implementation of policy to comply with "English only" law

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The objective of the present study was to address the following three questions using publicly available, norm-referenced test data:

* How are English learner students (ELs) in San Diego secondary public schools performing on an English reading test (SAT 9) in each year after California voters passed the "English only" initiative (Proposition 227)?

* Regarding such students, does California's standard indicator of achievement—percentage of test-takers scoring at or above the 50th national percentile rank (NPR)—show the same pattern as other indicators (mean scaled scores and number of correct test items)?

* How does the reading achievement of ELs compare with that of non-ELs (i.e., native English speakers and ELs who had been

redesignated as fluent English proficient) at low socioeconomic (SES) schools? At high SES schools?

The present study was based on a concern (rather than a theoretical framework) about educational consequences arising from California voters' passage of the "English only" initiative in June 1998. The intention of this proposition was to improve the English reading and writing skills of non-native English speaking students. It also represented a marked departure from existing bilingual education programs that "English only" proponents claimed to be ineffective.

To comply with Proposition 227's requirements, all of California's public school districts administered a newly adopted English-language norm referenced test (SAT 9) to large numbers of ELs. In some districts, ELs represented a considerable proportion of the K-1 1 test takers. For example, in 1998-99 (the school year immediately after Proposition 227's passage), approximately 26 percent (24,622) of the 95,953 SAT 9 test takers in San Diego City Schools (SDCS) were ELs (these numbers came from data sources cited below).

This study's methodology consisted of analyzing (descriptive statistics, unpaired comparisons, and regressions) publicly

available 1998-99 and 1999-2000 SAT 9 Reading data; these were the first two years of SAT 9 administration since Proposition 227's passage. The scope of the analyses was restricted to students attending secondary schools in SDCS. This district was used as a test case because it had 1) the second largest enrollment of all public school districts in California, 2) the largest enrollment of public school districts in San Diego County, and 3) a well-defined policy for complying with Proposition 227's requirements.

For each of the comprehensive senior (N=16) and middle/junior (N=23) high schools in the present study, SAT 9 Reading data were obtained from the California Department of Education's web sites (http://165.74.253.20/star99/indexJndex.html and http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2000d/). These data were available in tabular format disaggregated by 1) school, 2) ELs vs. non-ELs, and 3) grade levels. They were not disaggregated by individual students or classrooms.

Using data available from SDCS' web site (http://www.sandi.net/research/reports/index.htm) regarding the percentage of students at each secondary school who were eligible for free/reduced-price meals, we subdivided schools in this study into high SES (N=11 and 14 for senior and middle/junior high schools, respectively) and low SES (N=5 and 9, respectively). For each SES

group of schools, we then used the state's SAT 9 Reading data that disaggregated test-takers into ELs and non-ELs (the state's web site did not disaggregate data for students who were native English-speaking nor for those who had been redesignated as fluent English proficient).

Descriptive statistics and unpaired comparisons were performed on the following three indicators of SAT 9 Reading performance for ELs and non-ELs at each grade level: percentages scoring at or above the 50th NPR, mean scaled scores, and mean number of correct items on English/Language Arts (the state's values represent reading and writing combined).

Many statistically significant ($p<0.05$) results were generated by our analyses. Perhaps the most educationally meaningful findings were those directly related to our first two objectives—how secondary ELs in SDCS performed on SAT 9 Reading in each year after Proposition 227's passage, and whether the three indicators of SAT 9 Reading performance (percentage scoring at or above the 50th NPR, mean scaled scores, and mean number of correct items) all showed the same pattern for these students.

Regarding the first objective, secondary ELs' SAT 9 Reading performance was very low on one indicator (percentage scoring at

or above the 50th NPR) while considerably better on the other two (Table 1). We also found that these students' 1999-2000 scores were essentially identical to their 1998-1999 scores on all three indicators. The statistical evidence clearly indicated that secondary ELs' scores showed little or no improvement across the two years after SDCS implemented policies to comply with Proposition 227 ($p>0.05$). This finding was generalized over school levels, grade levels, and school SES.

Regarding the second objective, of great surprise and interest was the finding that secondary ELs' SAT 9 Reading mean scaled scores for both years were only 60 or fewer points below the value corresponding to the 50th NPR. These students' scaled scores ranged between 600 and 700 points out of 900 total depending upon school level and school SES. This finding was surprising because less than 10 percent of ELs scored at or above the 50th NPR regardless of school level or SES (Table 1).

Several intriguing results were generated by analyses related to our third objective. The percentage of ELs scoring at or above the 50th NPR (2-10 percent depending upon school level and SES) on the English language reading test was lower ($p<0.01$) than the corresponding percentage of non-ELs (30-60 percent depending upon school level and SES). ELs' mean scaled scores also were lower

than non-ELs' for both years, but the performance gap on this indicator was only 60 points or less (regardless of school level or SES). ELs answered 30-40 English/Language Arts items correctly (out of 90) while non-ELs answered 50-70 items correctly. Interestingly, non-ELs at the high SES secondary schools answered 5-10 more items correctly than counterparts at the low ones while ELs at the high SES secondary schools performed almost identically to counterparts at the low ones (Table 1).

Non-ELs' 1999-2000 SAT 9 Reading scores were essentially identical to their 1998-1999 scores and showed little or no improvement across the two years, the school levels, grade levels, school SES, and the three indicators ($p>0.05$; Table 1).

Another noteworthy finding was that the mean scaled scores of low SES schools (aggregating ELs and non-ELs) were lower ($p<0.05$) for each of the two years than corresponding values for high SES schools (regardless of school level). However, the actual difference between low and high SES secondary schools was less than 50 scaled score points out of 900 total.

Other outcomes of our descriptive and regression analyses were as follows (independent of the students' grade levels):

* High SES schools had lower proportions of SAT 9 Reading test takers who were ELs and higher proportions who were non-ELs than low SES schools.

* The higher the school's proportion of SAT 9 Reading test takers who were ELs, the lower the school's percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th NPR and vice versa.

* The percentage of non-ELs scoring at or above the 50th NPR consistently was significantly ($p<0.05$) higher at the high SES secondary schools than at the low ones. This was not true for ELs; their values were single-digit at both high and low SES schools (Table 1).

When considering our findings' educational importance, several methodological considerations must be kept in mind. First, this study was intentionally restricted to secondary students in SDCS. The generalizability to elementary students and other public school districts in California remains to be assessed. Second, because the publicly available SAT 9 data were not disaggregated by student, we could not perform a cohort analysis or control for student-level variables (e.g., the students' number of years in the system). Third, in addition to administering a reading test in English to ELs, SDCS developed and implemented a new biliteracy

program (among other changes) to comply with Proposition 227. Thus, our observations about SAT 9 Reading performance cannot be attributed to a single causal factor.

Keeping the above caveats in mind, the present findings are educationally important for the following reasons. First, compliance with the "English only" initiative's requirements evidently has not yet benefited secondary ELs' SAT 9 Reading performance in SDCS. Such students collectively have shown little, if any, improvement across the two years since Proposition 227's passage. Second, although low SES secondary schools in SDCS that have been characterized as "failing" are statistically different from high SES schools on the percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th NPR, the present findings suggest that an increase in the number of correct test items by as few as 5 could warrant a more favorable characterization of these schools.

The present findings have the following potentially important instructional policy implications.

* If a similar pattern of SAT 9 Reading scores is observed in comparable analyses on 2000-01 data, they could warrant a reconsideration of Proposition 227's requirement that ELs take a norm-referenced reading test in English.

* In light of the present finding that a school's SAT 9 Reading performance indicators are inversely related to the proportion of test takers who are ELs, Proposition 227's requirement that ELs take a norm-referenced reading test in English might be more detrimental to low SES schools than high SES ones.

* Schools with high proportions of ELs might benefit from focusing on aspects of English language instruction that would enable such students to answer 5-10 additional SAT 9 Reading items correctly. An analysis of individual students' scores by quartile may prove useful in identifying which ones to target.

* Continued reliance upon the percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th NPR as an indicator of school performance might provide a biased and/or inaccurate picture leading to ineffective or detrimental policy implementations. The mean number of correct items might be a more educationally meaningful indicator.

TABLE 1. SDCS SECONDARY ELs' AND NON-ELs' PERFORMANCE ON THREE INDICATORS OF SAT 9 READING ACHIEVEMENT IN EACH YEAR AFTER PASSAGE OF PROPOSITION 227

STUDENTS	SCHOOL LEVEL	SES	YEAR	% AT OR ABOVE 50th NPR	MEAN SCALED SCORE®	# CORRECT ITEMS
ELs	middle/jr	low	1998-1999	7.4	644.3	37.1
			1999-2000	6.8	644.3	36.6
		high	1998-1999	8.3	646.3	37.7
			1999-2000	9.8	650.8	37.8
	senior	low	1998-1999	2.3	657.4	34.5
			1999-2000	2.0*	658.1*	35.1*
		high	1998-1999	4.0	660.6	35.7
			1999-2000	5.5*	664.9*	37.3*
non-ELs	middle/jr	low	1998-1999	45.0*	679.5*	50.7*
			1999-2000	44.4**	680.1*	50.3**
		high	1998-1999	65.1*	697.3*	58.8*
			1999-2000	70.6**	701.1**	58.5**
	senior	low	1998-1999	31.7#	692.6#	50.0#
			1999-2000	27.6##	693.2##	50.8##
		high	1998-1999	50.8#	707.8#	56.0#
			1999-2000	53.4##	710.0##	57.7##

* = These values within a column are significantly different from each other, $p<0.05$.

* = These values within a column are significantly different from each other, $p<0.01$.

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SES = socioeconomic status
NPR = national percentile rank

[1] The mean scaled score corresponding to the 50th NPR is 681, 691, 701, 709, and 711 for Grades 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 respectively.

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